

MOTION BY SUPERVISOR MARK RIDLEY-THOMAS

March 22, 2016

Proclaim March 22, 2016 as Tuskegee Airmen Day in Los Angeles County

The Tuskegee Experience (also known as the Tuskegee Airmen Experience) began in 1941 when the Army Air Corps established a segregated base, Tuskegee Army Air Field in Alabama, to recruit and train African American pilots to fly and maintain combat aircraft. Prior to 1940, African Americans were barred from flying for the U.S. military. The military selected the Tuskegee Institute to train pilots because of its engineering and technical instructors and its commitment to aeronautical training. Additionally, the Tuskegee Institute was ideally situated in a climate conducive to year-round flying. The Tuskegee program became the center for African American aviation during World War II.

The first aviation cadet class graduated in March 1942. From 1942 through 1946, 992 pilots graduated at Tuskegee Army Air Field, all receiving commissions and pilot wings. 450 of these pilots served overseas in either the 99th Fighter Squadron or the 332nd Fighter Group.

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The 99th Fighter Squadron was the first African American flying unit. It deployed from Tuskegee to North Africa during April 1943. Flying single-seat P-40 Warhawks, the squadron flew patrol missions to protect Allied shipping in the Mediterranean Sea and attacked enemy targets on the Mediterranean Islands of Pantelleria and Sicily. The 99th Fighter Squadron received two Presidential Unit Citations for outstanding tactical air support and aerial combat before joining the 332nd Fighter Group, which received the Presidential Unit Citation for its longest bomber escort mission on March 24, 1945 to Berlin, Germany where members destroyed or damaged eight German jet fighters without losing any of their own fighter aircraft to the enemy.

The Tuskegee Experience included more than 16,000 air traffic controllers, bombardiers, flight instructors, mechanics, navigators, officers, pilots, radio technicians, weather forecasters, and maintenance and support staff who kept the planes in the air. Together, the graduates and their support crew completed more than 15,000 sorties, 1,500 missions, destroyed 262 German aircraft, sank one enemy destroyer, and received 916 marks of honor, including more than 150 Distinguished Flying Crosses.

Despite their accomplishments, the Tuskegee Airmen were deprived of officer positions, excluded from specific areas of the base, and subject to abuse by white Tuskegee police and conflicts with white flight instructors. In December 1943, a new base commander instituted less discriminatory policies giving new confidence to the Tuskegee Airmen.

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The Tuskegee Airmen overcame segregation and prejudice to become one of the most highly respected fighter groups of World War II. They proved conclusively that African Americans could fly and maintain sophisticated combat aircraft. The Tuskegee Airmen's achievements, together with the men and women who supported them, paved the way for full integration of the U.S. military.

On March 22, 2016, a commemorative event will be held at Moton Field at the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site in Tuskegee, Alabama. This event will celebrate the valor of all who took part in the Tuskegee Experience, as well as their resilience in the face of adversity. There are fewer than 250 Tuskegee Airmen still alive in the United States today; it is estimated that approximately one dozen reside in Los Angeles County. The fortitude and accomplishments of all Tuskegee Airmen, especially these local heroes, should be recognized on the 75th anniversary of the Tuskegee Experience.

I THEREFORE MOVE THAT THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS:

Proclaim March 22, 2016 as "Tuskegee Airmen Day" in the County of Los Angeles and express gratitude and admiration to the surviving Tuskegee Airmen, and to the local organizations and agencies that support them, such as the Tuskegee Airmen Scholarship Foundation, the Tuskegee Airmen – Los Angeles chapter, and the Los Angeles County Department of Military and Veteran Affairs.

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